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ABSTRACT

This third annual survey investigated teachers' attitudes about writing and reading. Subjects, 507 K-5 teachers and middle, junior high, and senior high school teachers of math, science, social studies, and English teaching in public or private schools, were surveyed by telephone. Results indicated that: (1) a majority of teachers considered reading to be the single most important skill for students to learn, followed by mathematics and writing; (2) writing is the skill in which most teachers see the most room for improvement among students; (3) although secondary school teachers were the most likely to place a high priority on writing, they were the least likely to give the development of writing skills high priority in their classes or to have their students write for them every day; (4) the first principle in the teaching of writing is the interconnection between writing and reading; (5) parents play a major role in the development of their children's reading and math skills, but little part in the development of their writing ability; and (6) to help develop children's writing skills, what teachers most wanted parents to do was to read to their children and to take them to the local public library. (Contains four tables and three figures of data.) (RS)

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ED 378 568

TO: The American Federation of Teachers and the Chrysler Corporation

FROM: Peter D. Hart Research Associates

DATE: October 26, 1994

SUBJECT: AFT/Chrysler Report on Kids, Parents, and Reading: A National Survey of Teachers on Reading and Writing

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This is the third annual survey in a series of national projects for the American Federation of Teachers, conducted by Peter D. Hart Research and funded by the Chrysler Corporation. The first project was a survey among parents of children ages one to 14; the second was a survey of young people ages nine to 17. The current project is a telephone survey among 507 teachers, including K to 5 teachers, and middle, junior high, and senior high school teachers of math, science, social studies, and English. Both public and private school teachers are included in the survey. All interviews were conducted between September 15 and 20, 1994.

The current survey builds on the work of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and its 1992 "Writing Report Card."

The following memorandum summarizes the key findings from the survey among teachers.

Introduction

Many leaders in business, education, the press, and other communities lament the trouble Americans seem to have in communicating with each other through the written word. The problem, it appears, is less a failure in reading skills than it is many Americans' inability to write coherently. Indeed, the National Assessment of Educational Progress concludes in its *Writing Report Card*, "Many students at each grade level continue to have serious difficulty in producing effective informative, persuasive, or narrative writing."

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This series of national surveys provides testimony to the emphasis that parents and teachers are placing on the development of reading skills among young people in our society, although the data make it equally clear that too few people in the educational process--teachers, parents, and students--give writing the priority needed to produce a generation of Americans who are able to communicate clearly through the written and not just the spoken word. Indeed, the development of good writing skills seems to have fallen between the cracks, overshadowed in the primary grades by the importance of teaching reading and basic math skills, in the later grades by the pressure to teach specific subject matter, and in the press and the public's attention by American students' low scores on cross-national science and mathematics tests. **If we as a nation are to improve our ability to communicate in writing, some constituency at some stage in the educational process must make writing its number-one priority.**

The results from this survey of K through 12 teachers leads to four additional conclusions.

- Teachers believe there is more room for improvement in students' writing ability than in their reading, math, science, or computer skills.
- Secondary school teachers place the highest priority on writing skills, but feel they have the least time to teach students to write well.
- Teachers believe that good writing and good reading skills are interwoven, so that writing skills are best developed in conjunction with good reading habits.

- Parents are not playing the role they should in the development of their children's writing abilities.

Research Findings

1. **A majority of all teachers surveyed consider reading to be the single most important skill for young people to learn; math ranks second among the skills, and writing comes in third.** Teachers were read a list of several subject areas and asked to selected the one in which they feel it is most important for young people to learn basic skills these days, and the one they regard as the second most important. The following table summarizes the results among teachers, as well as comparable results among parents and young people from the previous two surveys.

Most Important Skills For Young People To Learn

	Teachers			*Parents*	*Youth*
	Most Important %	Second Most Important %	Total Important %	Total Important %	Total Important %
Reading	56	13	69	62	34
Math	11	40	51	54	65
Writing	13	22	35	20	21
Computers	5	12	17	40	34
Science	2	3	5	10	24
History	1	1	2	4	13

Whatever grade or subject they teach, wherever they teach, and whatever the social background of their students, a majority of teachers select reading as

one of the two most important skills for young people to learn, and more than three in five parents agree. However, just one in three of the nine- to 17-year-olds interviewed believe that reading is among the most important skills for them to learn; nearly twice as many of them believe that mastery of mathematics is more important.

Compared to reading and math, writing clearly ranks third among the "Three Rs." Teachers place it third on their list of priorities, parents rank it fourth on their list, and young people assign it to fifth place, behind science and computers. While one in three teachers believe that writing is one of the two most essential skills, only one in five parents and students agree.

Those teachers who regard writing as a crucial skill do so for two basic reasons: that people need to communicate through writing, and that writing makes a significant contribution to the development of critical thinking.

> Writing goes hand in hand with reading, and if a person can read and write, the other things will fall into place.
> Second-grade teacher, 50 to 54, Inner-city school

> It's communication: to be understood, you have to write effectively.
> Senior-high English teacher, 55 to 59, Rural school

> Writing is an everyday skill, [but] it's a lost art.
> Fourth-grade teacher, 50 to 54, Small-town school

> Writing is a lost art of communication. [Students] don't like to do it and don't do it very well.
> Middle-school social studies teacher, 45 to 49, Rural school

> It's the second link in the chain. The ability to write develops the ability to think, to make distinctions.
> Senior-high English teacher, 45 to 49, Small-town school

> You use writing in any career you have. You need it in everyday life.
> Kindergarten teacher, 45 to 49, Urban school

> When writing skills are mastered, [students] can do anything they want. They can form their own complete thoughts and express themselves freely.
> Senior-high social studies teacher, 45 to 49, Suburban school

> We are an information society, and if [students] can't read or write, they can't perform in society.
> Fifth-grade teacher, 40 to 44, Suburban school

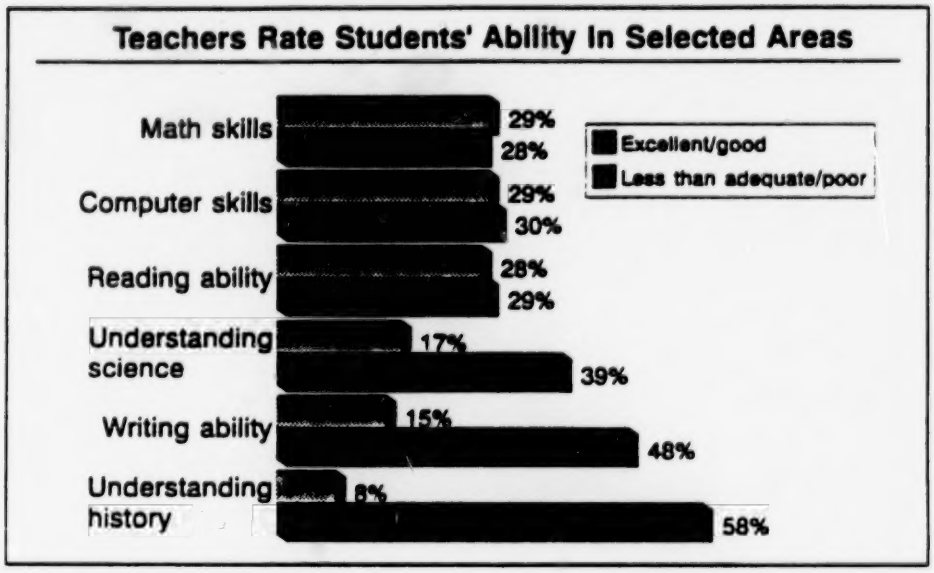
> Citizens who can express themselves certainly are more valuable than ones who cannot express themselves.
> Kindergarten teacher, 40 to 44, Rural school

Despite these testimonials, few parents and even fewer students accord writing the same level of importance, and two in three of their neighbors in the teaching profession believe the emphasis on writing is eclipsed not only by reading, but also by math, science, history, and computer skills.

2. **Writing is the skill in which teachers see the most room for improvement among students today.** This is especially true among secondary school English and social studies teachers and among teachers in small towns and rural districts. Overall, 34% of teachers identify writing as one of the two areas in which they observe the most room for improvement, followed by 31% who cite

reading, 28% who specify math, 19% for science, 18% for computers, and 5% who select history.

The extent to which teachers believe their students are falling short in their writing ability is reflected in the proportion who rate the writing ability of young people as either less than adequate or poor. The following graph summarizes the results for the skills teachers were asked to evaluate.



Nearly half the teachers surveyed believe young people are unable to express themselves adequately through the written word; less than one in seven say young people are excellent or good writers. The education professionals most likely to rate young people's writing ability as inadequate are

teachers of working-class children and secondary school English and social studies teachers.

As the "Writing Report Card" documented, students are less experienced and less skilled in persuasive writing than in informative or narrative communication. Among all teachers, 46% (including majorities in middle schools and high schools) have their students do more informative writing--conveying ideas and information--than either narrative or persuasive writing, and 36% (including a majority in elementary schools) have their students predominantly do narrative writing--stories and personal essays. In comparison, just seven percent of teachers say their students do more persuasive writing--that which attempts to influence readers and change their thinking or behavior--than any other type. Even at the high school level, just 15% of teachers concentrate on persuasive writing.

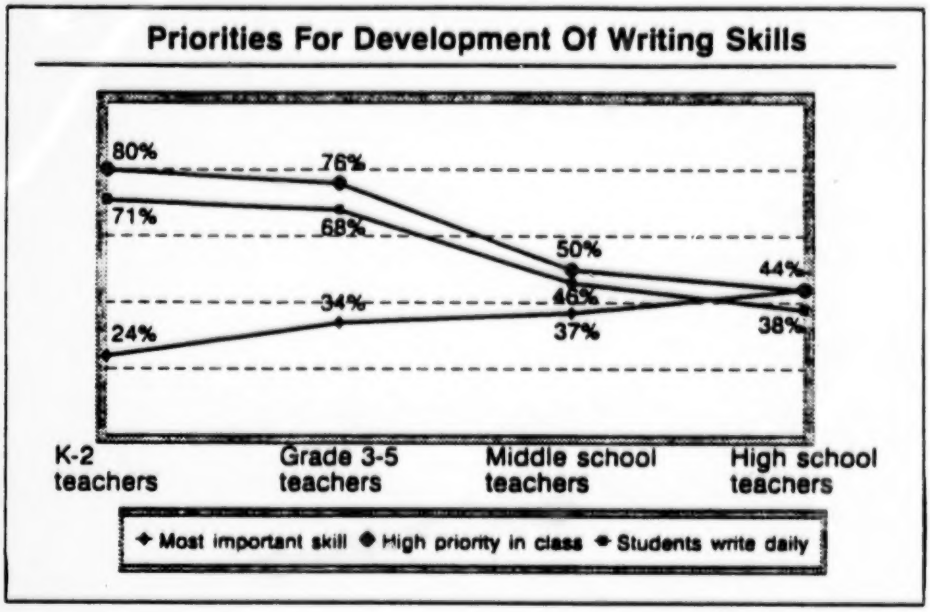
Not surprisingly, teachers rate students' ability in persuasive writing much lower than their ability in the other forms.

Teachers' Ratings Of Student Ability In Selected Types Of Writing

	Excellent/ Good %	Adequate %	Less Than Adequate Poor %
Informative writing that conveys ideas and information	31	34	29
Narrative writing, including stories or personal essays	35	33	22
Persuasive writing that attempts to influence readers and change their thinking or behavior	10	22	52

Indeed, a majority of teachers regard students' ability to write persuasively as falling short of what it should be.

3. Although secondary school teachers are the most likely to place a high priority on writing, they are the teachers least likely to give the development of writing skills high priority in their classes or to have their students write for them every day. The irony lies in the fact that as grade level increases, teachers attach increasing importance to writing skills, but they are forced to give decreasing priority to helping students develop those skills and they have their students write for their classes with decreasing frequency. The following graph summarizes the results by grade level.



The danger is that the teachers who place the most value on good writing skills feel they have the least time to work with their students to develop those skills.

As a result, at no stage in the education process is writing given *both* the priority and the time necessary for students to develop the skills expected of them in the later grades, higher education, and the modern work force. Writing is difficult to teach and difficult to learn to do well, which means that the development of good writing skills requires that, at some stage in the educational process, the educational system must elevate writing to a high enough priority and commit enough time for teachers to teach students to write well.

4. **The first principle in the teaching of writing is the interconnection between writing and reading.** As the following table shows, integrated reading and writing activities are the tools most frequently employed by teachers at all grade levels in teaching writing. Indeed, two-thirds of all teachers say that having good reading skills is essential to the development of good writing skills, and two in five say the reverse is true--that good writing skills are essential to good reading skills. The results also clearly show that intermediate grade teachers do the most with their students in term of preparatory activities and the nuts and bolts of spelling and grammar.

Selected Methods Teachers Identify As Central Elements In Their Teaching Of Writing

	All Teachers %	Grades K to 2 %	Grades 3 to 5 %	Middle School %	High School %
Integrated reading and writing, in which you emphasize the interconnection between reading and writing activities	61	71	78	53	49
Writing across the curriculum, in which you emphasize writing activities in subject areas other than English and the language arts	49	60	60	41	38
Writing process instruction, in which you emphasize multiple drafts, outlines, and other preparatory activities	48	30	75	50	38
Grammar or skill-based instruction, in which you emphasize and correct for spelling and mechanics	40	37	62	34	32

As the following additional results show, however, the mechanics of writing receive the least attention from teachers when they grade and comment on their students' writing.

Teachers' Top Priority In Grading And Commenting On Student Writing Assignments

	All Teachers %	Grades K to 2 %	Grades 3 to 5 %	Middle School %	High School %
Organization and coherence	39	23	41	50	40
The accuracy and quality of ideas	36	24	32	39	45
Creativity and imagination	27	30	36	24	20
Spelling, punctuation, and grammar	12	5	19	14	11

Meanwhile, teachers in the higher grades attach increasing importance to organization, coherence, accuracy, and the quality of ideas in students' writing. This shift across the grades is reflected in the type of assignments as well. The use of logs, journals, and narrative stories declines sharply in the middle grades and high school, while the assignment of analytical themes and research reports increases.

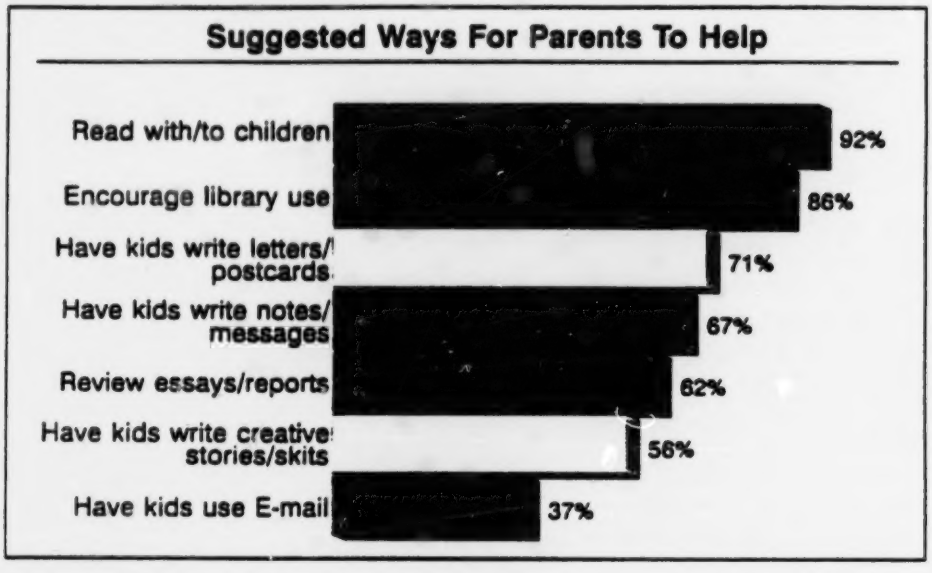
5. **Parents play a major role in the development of their children's reading and math skills, but little part in the development of their writing ability.** Two years ago, parents said they felt most capable of helping their children with reading and mathematics, and a year ago, young people told us these were the skills with which their parents gave them the most help. The teachers in the current survey concur, rating reading and math as the areas in which parents do the most to help their children learn basic skills.

In contrast, a majority of teachers (including two-thirds in elementary schools) say that parents do less to help their children with writing than with reading or math, and the parents and students agree. Just 16% of parents feel most capable of helping their children with writing, and only eight percent of students say their parents do more to help them with writing than with other skills.

More than three-fourths (78%) of teachers, however, want parents and other adults in the household to do more to help children develop their writing ability.

Furthermore, just 14% of teachers believe writing is an area in which parents are not able to provide much help.

6. **To help develop children's writing skills, what teachers most want parents to do is to read to their children and take them to the local public library.** When the teachers in this survey were asked to evaluate several ways in which parents might help their children develop better writing skills, majorities rated six of the seven suggestions as excellent ideas.



Reading to children and visiting the local library top the list, but large majorities of teachers also endorse such activities as writing postcards and letters to friends and relatives, communicating at home more through written notes and messages, and having children write stories, skits, and journals. Only the use of computer E-mail fails to receive the full-fledged endorsement of a majority of teachers.

Writing is a difficult skill to master, and indeed, just 16% of parents feel more comfortable in helping their children with writing than with the other skills tested in the surveys. However, teachers are not expecting parents to *teach* their children to write; rather, they are asking them to *read* to their children and *encourage* them to write, whether it be letters, postcards, notes, messages, or creative skits and stories just for fun. The thrust of the research findings from these three surveys is not America's inability to teach its young people to write, but its failure to make learning to communicate effectively through the written word a high priority for young Americans.